



CHILDREN'S WRITING AND FILM MEDIUM

—T.S. NARASIMHAN*

I will confine myself to the situation that exists with respect to writing for children and the media. When I talk of the media, I mean the conversion of the writing into a motion picture, be it in 8 mm/16 mm/35 mm format or video. As far as literary work in the field of adult motion pictures is concerned, quite a number of writings have been converted into feature films. The percentage may be low, but it is being done. When it comes to writings for children, the very basic question remains unanswered, that is, to what medium are we going to convert this literary work for children? Then comes the question of age-group, type of film—animation, puppet, action, docu-drama etc.

The first problem that arises on this point is the financial viability of a project and the avenue it has for exploitation. The cost of production remains practically the same, except for the payment to the artists and a few technicians. If a feature film costs around Rs. 45 lakhs, a children's film of the same type may cost Rs. 20 lakhs. And, when the film is produced, we should

think of the outlet for it.

The present theatre rental is so high, it is not possible to have a children's film released in a commercial theatre. Even if one releases the children's films, it faces various problem. The audience being children, they have either to come on their own to the theatre or in batches from schools. Hence, even at a lower cost, having produced a children's film, one does not have a proper outlet which can give a fair return. Once this problem is understood, one can go on to say how best the written children's literature could be utilised in our country for the film medium.

We should understand that the film and the writing are two different media requiring two lines of thinking and working. An author in two lines of imaginative writing can take you back five generations or pull you out to what you will be after two generations. To picturise this truthfully, it may take 10 to 30 minutes in length. So, the question of utilisation of the media and writing is to see how far they can run parallel to each other and how to narrow the

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gap between the parallel lines.

In this context, one has to realise the difference between fiction and non-fiction programmes. As far as presentation of non-fiction is concerned, and as long as factual writings are available, the film-maker has the liberty to present them in a format which he thinks is the best, incorporating these facts. As far as fiction is concerned, there are different levels on which one has to operate.

- (1) The author's concept and understanding of his writing by the film-maker.
- (2) Limitations under which the writing could be converted into Media.
- (3) If it is a period story, then all that goes with a period story like architecture, costume, properties, customs, beliefs and backdrop atmosphere and a multitude of other points should be taken into account to convert that story into a film. If it is produced on the feature film line, it becomes a classic and the returns are quite handsome. When it comes to children's books and the media, except works like *Oliver Twist*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *The Elves and the Shoe Maker* etc., very few literary works of this nature have been converted into children's films.

In India, we have a large number of children's stories but their backdrop is largely philosophical. It is a practice the world over, to write specially for children's films. Encouragement has to be given for such writing in India too, there must be definite financial benefits both for producer and the author. But till these circumstances are created, one does not see any scope of outlet other than the 'Devil of the Idiot Box'—Doordarshan. Unless Doordarshan increases showing of children's films everyday, there seems to be very little scope for converting literary works for children into

film medium—be it an enacted, animation or puppet presentation.

Coming to specific aspects of the conversion of R.K. Narayan's *Swamy and Friends* into a feature film, the problems faced were enormous. We were looking for artists who could deliver the dialogues both in Hindi and English. We were looking for a location which could match with Malgudi. We were looking for all that goes with the period like houses, atmosphere, costume, etc. It was an unbelievably heavy task that was taken upon by us. I would still not call it 100% true to the literary work. I would only say that a faithful attempt had been made. The amount that was spent to make this children's film for creating the atmosphere of its period and then converting it into television episodes was enormous and it has still not made the project financially viable. And it is nearly two years since the project was completed. I would end with a really firm note for writers of children's works to say that they have to rise against the treatment they are getting at the hands of Doordarshan and film producers and they should be heavily subsidised if they have to bring out good writings. When home video becomes part of children's way of life, then a new lot of video films for children can be made. Until then good-bye and good-luck to good writings for children for the purpose of film-making unless the Children's Film Society of India takes upon itself to produce as many as 50 to 60 children's films a year and distributes them. This is not at all difficult. It is the least we can offer to nearly 250 million children of our country. A country which boasts of making over 850 feature films has not yet come to the stage to make 5 children's films a year. If we look at the East European countries and USA, 1/4th of the time, their T.V. shows children's films. They also make special films for theatre release. Needless to say, it requires Government's encouragement in all aspects.